



SIX STRATEGIES FOR DIGITAL LEARNING SUCCESS

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Introduction

Technology has revolutionized corporate learning and leadership development. The number of organizations that use learning management systems is higher than ever before, and thanks to massive open online courses (MOOCs), small private online courses (SPOCS), microlearning, nanolearning, and other new media learning platforms, digital learning and training is at an all-time high.

Many learning and leadership development professionals, however, still consider expensive, face-to-face, instructor-led training preferable to digital learning. This paper will explore **six strategies** from the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) that talent leaders can leverage to make digital learning initiatives more effective within their organization. **When properly designed, delivered, and evaluated, digital learning initiatives can change a company's corporate culture, improve employee engagement, and increase retention.** On the flip side, if done poorly, digital learning initiatives can end up as meaningless corporate activities.

The **six strategies** explored in this paper are addressed under the following headings:

1. Less is More	4. Leaders as Teachers
2. Support from the Top	5. Learning Partnerships
3. Learner-Centered Design	6. What Gets Measured Gets Done

Technology changes faster than human behavior; therefore, the strategies in this white paper focus on culture and people rather than specific technologies. The recommendations are meant to last beyond short-term technological changes. We hope they will help learning professionals use technology to its best advantage, becoming one of the more useful tools in their leadership development toolkit. We also hope that this serves as a starting point for a broader conversation on how to make digital learning effective.

As with any important learning initiative, a leadership-focused digital learning initiative begins with a clear strategy and well-planned tactics. Our suggestions are informed by our work at CCL, which has more than 40 years of experience in researching leadership and developing leaders in diverse industries across the world.

What is a Digital Learning Initiative?

Any learning initiative that leverages technology to reach people that are in different places, at different times, is a digital learning initiative. Initiatives can take different forms including:

eLearning



Virtual Instructor-Led Training (VILT)



Blended Learning



Technology Enabled Learning



Typically, learning is self-paced and content is delivered through a learning management system.

STRATEGY 1: Less is More

10,000
Titles!

50,000 hours of
learning for all
15,000
employees!

"Can you imagine
the impact this
program will
have?!"

Many organizations start their digital learning initiative with expectations similar to those expressed in the quote above. Often a company will license a large digital learning library, using the theory that there is "something for everyone." However, such a broad initiative often lacks focus and strategy. One year later, the utilization rate for noncompliance courses is often below 10%. After all, just because your local library has 10,000 books doesn't mean you will read all of them—or even go to the library.

At CCL, we believe that learning initiatives need to focus on the unique needs of learners in the context of their organization's culture. The right amount of learning, served at the right time, and in the right portions keeps a leader growing. Some factors to consider for each learning initiative are:

- 1 Experience:** Know the experience level of a leader, and understand his or her role in the organization.
- 2 Time:** Early on, determine the time a leader might be able to devote to training and development.
- 3 Learning Objectives:** Determine specific learning objectives based on your organizational objectives, then select digital assets that align with them.

When CCL designers work with our clients, we do not recommend purchasing our entire library for an entire population. We carefully assess a client's unique needs and recommend content appropriate for the audience.

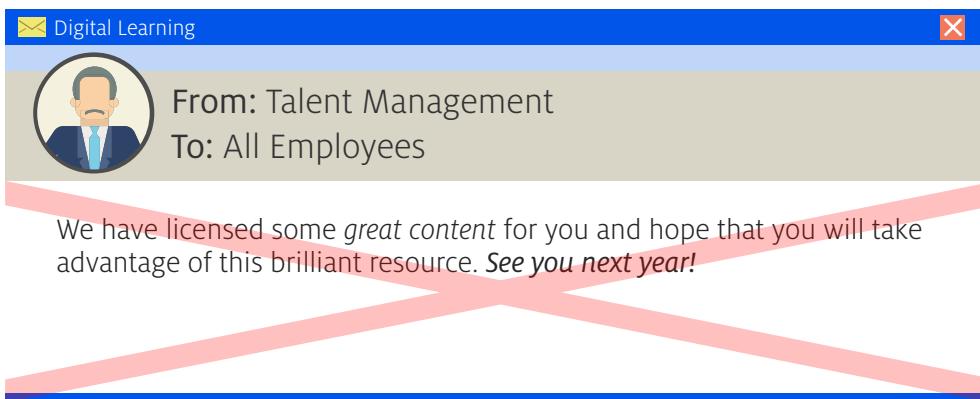
Talent Leader Insight:

"Consistently organize all your training content, classroom and online, into the same organizational structure so it is easy for your participants to find the content that is mapped to the skills they need to develop. My goal as a professional development director is to provide the training to help our consultants develop the skills they need in order to deliver our business plan. We don't just train for the fun of training. We enable our consultants to learn the specific skills necessary to help them be successful, personally fulfilled, and deliver our plan."



Laurie Ann Stetzer
Director of Professional
Development
Kurt Salmon
(www.kurtsalmon.com)

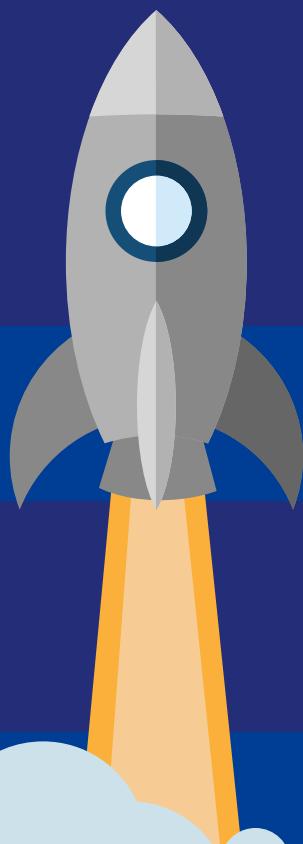
STRATEGY 2: Support from the Top



No one reading this white paper would roll out an initiative in an e-mail like the one to the left. It is vague, detached, and there's no stamp of support from senior management. Here are some things to consider when launching a learning initiative.

E-mail is never enough: The worst possible way to launch a digital learning initiative is via an impersonal e-mail. In 2015, the number of business e-mails sent and received per user, per day averaged 122 (Radicati Group, Inc.). A generic e-mail like the one above will get lost in the barrage of the many other e-mails that employees receive in the course of any given day. An e-mail from an automated account is even less likely to grab the attention of employees, which means the announcement of the launch of new digital content may be overlooked.

Some e-mails are more powerful than others: A learning initiative, like any other initiative important to an organization, needs employee buy-in and the support of upper management. If an initiative isn't supported by senior leaders, employees will not make it a priority. When the CEO or another senior leader sends an e-mail or attends a launch webinar to explain the relevance of the digital learning initiative to the company's sustained success, then employees are more inclined to get on board.



Videos are better than e-mail: Ideally, you want your CEO to understand and appreciate the digital learning content and then make a short video about it. We have done this with a few of our clients and the impact has been substantial and consequential. CCL is a strong advocate of blended learning, which combines different learning approaches within a single program. Also, CCL believes what happens in the classroom shouldn't stay in the classroom. Instead, if a senior leader comes to address a group of learners participating in a learning initiative that is face-to-face, leverage that time to make a video and put it on the company's learning platform.

Identify your senior leader champion: Within your senior leadership, you will know from past experience who your learning champions are. Figuring out who they are, and then asking for their participation is critical to the success of your learning initiative.

Prepare your leaders: Take time to educate the senior leadership team about the initiative and get the team's support to ensure that a foundation for success is strategically laid out early in the process. You cannot go back and make a first impression with your learning initiative, so carefully consider its introduction.



"The biggest obstacle to finding a champion is getting the gumption to ask. We all know how to identify a champion, what qualities to look for and the requirements we need out of one. The greatest lack of champions in the work environment is for lack of asking."

Margot Halstead

Principal, Talent Management & Leadership Coach
Orbital ATK (www.orbitalatk.com)

STRATEGY 3: Learner-Centered Design

Learners in a corporate setting are busy individuals. The number of hours worked in a week continues to rise every year. In our increasingly hyperconnected world, leaders are also experiencing more change at a faster rate than ever before. They are responding by spending more time working, both in the office and at home. Leaders are facing new challenges in their roles and are concerned about being successful and being seen as successful. Just as often, leaders will not admit this publicly. As a result, most leaders are very task-focused, with little or no time set aside for development. However, finding time to develop new skills would actually help leaders become more effective. It would also free up time to focus on essential work.

Talent leaders must do more than just provide resources for development. They also have to encourage and guide leaders through their developmental journey, making sure those participating in a digital learning initiative understand the inherent value of the program in their daily work lives.

Talent leaders should understand the organizational climate in which the leaders work and leverage technology to fit into their routines, rather than adding a disruption.

This is critical for the success of any initiative. For example, promoting and focusing on one leadership topic a month, or one topic a quarter, and rolling that out in a very deliberate way has a high likelihood of being impactful.

Humans are creatures of habit. If you set up a cadence that your learners get used to, you will find that they will keep coming back. Avenues to create a pragmatic cadence are:

- Use live virtual sessions to increase dialogue between geographically diverse learners.
- Host lunch-and-learn sessions for co-located learners allowing leaders to exchange ideas informally.
- Set up an internal social network like Yammer to foster networking among learners.
- Create a private group on LinkedIn as a communication tool.
- Create online job aids that offer step-by-step guidance in real time when issues are encountered in the workplace.



Talent Leader Insight:



Our Leadership EDGE program is designed to provide a continuous emphasis on the development of leadership and management skills at all levels of the organization. Establishing a clear routine and acceptable cadence to this ongoing program is crucial. We initially started with a “Topic of the Month” but found that it was too much for our leaders. After changing to five topics per year, we found that the leaders were more accepting. You don’t have to get it right the first time. Be open to changing course based on what you are hearing.”

Fred Dierksmeier - Director, Talent Management
Essilor of America (www.essilorusa.com)

STRATEGY 4: Embrace a “Leaders as Teachers” Approach

Digital learning doesn’t have to be completely self-paced. Leadership concepts should be practiced and reinforced in the workplace. Embracing leaders as teachers is a powerful way to scale a digital learning initiative through all levels of the organization. For this to be implemented, talent leaders will need to give employees the tools they need to become good teachers.

In partnership with CCL, Essilor of America designed a multiyear, blended learning initiative for more than 1,300 frontline supervisors. A new topic was introduced five times a year via an hour-long online training module that was shared across 100 manufacturing labs across North America.

The key to Essilor’s success was combining an understanding of its company culture with validated, off-the-shelf content from CCL that could be quickly deployed across a broad geography.

Essilor and CCL carefully selected modules that reflected Essilor’s core values, workplace environment, and its unique developmental needs so the initiative would be relevant to leaders and impactful for the organization as a whole. Essilor’s blended learning initiative scaled leadership development across three levels of the organization, helping the organization begin to develop a cohesive leadership culture.



“We are on our way toward building a comprehensive program that prepares supervisors on the front line to lead the way. As a bonus, everyone benefits, including the managers who serve as coaches and mentors.”

Matt Jones
Vice President, Talent Management
Essilor of America (www.essilorusa.com)

STRATEGY 5: Learning Partnerships

Leadership-focused digital learning initiatives are only as engaging as the people that are engaged in them.

Leadership development is all about “human skills”—skills that require the ability to adapt ideas and guidelines to the environment. These skills require discernment, judgment, and presence of mind, as well as the willingness and motivation to commit to the practice that is required to learn anything new. Learning new skills isn’t easy. Learners need the support of key partners to stay motivated and engaged to ensure that learning is sustained past the classroom. Two kinds of partnerships can provide the necessary support needed for in-depth learning: accountability partners and learning partners.



Accountability Partners

Linking accountability partners connects peers who learn together, share experiences, and discuss challenges and goals. This transformative development experience creates a bond between participants that fosters an interest in helping each other succeed and builds accountability. Accountability partners act as sounding boards for each other as they experience similar challenges, encourage each other and push each other to move beyond the status quo. When introducing the concept of accountability partners to learners, it is imperative that parameters are set up that define the relationship. Suggestions include:

- 1 Build in time for activities that help groups and partners get to know each other, both early in the development process and on an ongoing basis.
- 2 Create opportunities for peer coaching to help participants get new ideas, approaches and feedback from their accountability partners in support of their work and development.
- 3 Set expectations for accountability partners, including establishing clear guidelines for how often accountability partners should meet and outlining measures for accountability to each other and to the organization.



Learning Partners

People apply what they learn more effectively when they have a developmental relationship with someone who understands the organizational context and is committed to helping them be successful. An at-work learning partner may be a boss, mentor, coach, HR business partner, peer, or other trusted person. The role of the learning partner is to provide support for learning, to help learners reflect on ideas and insights from the development experience, and to assist them as they apply it in their context (Cromwell and Kolb, 2004). Learning partners observe new behaviors, provide feedback, and reward progress.

Both learners and the at-work learning partners should be educated about the purpose of the relationship and provided with specific ways to work together, such as:

- 1 Have learners identify a few items (assessment data, goals, insights, or key ideas) to share with their learning partners. These items should be added to the learner’s action or development plan.
- 2 Establish a plan that outlines how often the learning partner and learner meet.
- 3 Provide conversation guides, expectations, and checklists for learners and learning partners. The hardest part of getting started is coming up with the right questions to discuss. CCL’s Lead2.0 packages have a number of components that help guide conversation between learning partners.

STRATEGY 6: What Gets Measured Gets Done

The measurement of any developmental effort is important to ensure that development efforts are effective and that the return on investment is meaningful. Digital learning initiatives offer some data insights that typical face-to-face developmental experiences don't. There are two interrelated aspects of digital learning initiatives to think about:

1



Evaluating the Learning Initiative

2



Evaluating the Engagement of the Learner



Evaluating the Learning Initiative

To develop an informative and relevant evaluation of a leadership-focused digital learning initiative, we recommend considering the following factors:



1. Previous Experience Matters

Include data-collection measures focusing on the content and experience, but also explore the participants' previous experience and attitudes toward the training delivery mode. If a participant had to learn the platform first and then absorb the content, the cognitive load will be higher. This might negatively affect his or her overall experience.



2. Recycling Isn't Always a Good Idea

Check all evaluation elements for appropriateness in the nontraditional digital or virtual space. Some characteristics that make a traditional face-to-face program successful may not directly translate without adjustment in the digital space. The same is true for the evaluation instruments. For instance, a standard survey that asks about something that can only occur in the face-to-face space needs to be tweaked or removed.



3. Collect Analytics from the System

Use other information that might not normally be necessary or available in the face-to-face classroom. For example, some online programs allow you to track information such as how much time participants are spending in the virtual classroom. If participants are not spending the minimum time they should watching the online content and are not accessing the resources, this might be an indication that additional participation support like reminders are necessary for successful completion.



4. Timing and Triggers Matter

Think carefully about data collection timing and triggers. Participants who complete a self-paced online program that is accessible anytime and anywhere might not have completed the program at the same time in the same way. Because of this, data collection may be spread over time, which may negatively affect the findings. For instance, if some participants take a class and provide feedback before a company restructures and others are still taking the class online when the restructure is announced. Participant experiences and scores might be different before and after the event.



5. Clear Program Objectives are Crucial

Make sure the program objectives are clear and measurable. Some research in higher education suggests that instructors in face-to-face environments are sometimes able to overcome weaker content alignment on student satisfaction ratings because of their charismatic nature and likable style. The digital environment does not lend itself to the same opportunities between the instructor and the students, so measurable objectives are vital.



Evaluation of the Engagement of Learners in Learning Initiatives

Here are two things to consider when evaluating the engagement of learners:



1. Company Culture

The most important component here is always the company's culture. A strategy built around metrics that align to the company's strengths and cultural preferences is much more likely to succeed.

For example, gamification will work if the company culture encourages public competitiveness. However, if this behavior is counterculture, there is a risk of putting people off and creating an environment where people are likely to be embarrassed publicly. This could result in people checking out completely. Similarly, putting a goal like "complete three e-courses in the first quarter" on an individual development plan will work if that is a cultural preference within the organization. If not, it's likely to become a checkbox activity that manifests in content being clicked through very quickly. This can be measured by time spent in a course. If learners are taking five minutes to "complete" a video-based e-course that needs at least 30 minutes in which to truly engage, compliance is evident, but commitment and impact are not likely.



2. Business Objectives

Employees are much more likely to be committed to a learning initiative that is aligned with the strategic business objectives of the organization. When learners see the connection of the learning initiative with the big picture objectives of the company, and see that they are building something in which they believe, initiatives are much more likely to gain commitment.



Talent Leader Insight:

"The return on investment for conducting CCL's Situation-Behavior-Impact Feedback (SBI) training at VRM is being reinforced as we ensure that learning is transferred from the classroom to on-the-job behavior change. For the past 18 months, cohort (team lead, manager, senior manager, director, etc.) written and verbal SBI refresher training sessions and one-on-one coaching sessions have been held to ensure the methodology is used as part of ongoing employee feedback and as part of annual performance review documentation and discussions."

Phyllis Wright, PhD

Senior Vice President, HR Strategies

VRM Co. (vrmco.com)



Conclusion

Technology offers a way for talent leaders to provide developmental opportunities in real-time and across broad geographic locations. With the proper planning, leadership-focused digital learning initiatives can offer a scalable way to deepen development training and drive training throughout the organization. Thoughtfully assessing the development needs of the organization and taking time to get senior management's support provides a firm foundation on which the initiative can be built. Connecting learners with each other and mentors ensures that learning is sustained. Effective evaluation confirms that development is progressing and that there is a measurable return on the investment.

When used strategically, technology offers talent leaders another useful tool for their leadership development toolkits.

The key element in all of this is you—your company, your culture, the audience you serve, and your specific challenge. Taking the time to understand these factors is critical to creating a learning initiative that makes sense for you and the leaders you serve.

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